

Sachsenhausen concentration camp

Sachsenhausen (German pronunciation: [zaksn̩ˈhaʊzən]) or

Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg was a Nazi concentration camp in Oranienburg, Germany, used primarily for political prisoners from 1936 to the end of the Third Reich in May, 1945. After World War II, when Oranienburg was in the Soviet Occupation Zone, the structure was used as an NKVD special camp until 1950 (See NKVD special camp Nr. 7). The remaining buildings and grounds are now open to the public as a museum.



Prisoners of Sachsenhausen, 19 December 1938

Sachsenhausen under the NSDAP

The camp was established in 1936. It was located 35 km north of Berlin, which gave it a primary position among the German concentration camps: the administrative centre of all concentration camps was located in Oranienburg, and Sachsenhausen became a training centre for Schutzstaffel (SS) officers (who would often be sent to oversee other camps afterwards). Executions took place at Sachsenhausen, especially of Soviet prisoners of war. Among the prisoners, there was a "hierarchy": at the top, criminals (rapists, murderers), then Communists (red triangles), then homosexuals (pink triangles) and at the very bottom Jews (yellow triangles). During the earlier stages of the camp's existence the executions were done in a trench, either by shooting or by hanging. A large task force of prisoners were used from the camp to work in nearby brickworks to meet Albert Speer's vision of rebuilding Berlin.^[1] Sachsenhausen was originally not intended as an extermination camp—instead, the systematic murder was conducted in camps to the east. In 1942 large numbers of Jewish inmates were relocated to Auschwitz. However the construction of a gas chamber and ovens by the camp commandant Anton Kaindl in March 1943^[2] facilitated the means to kill larger numbers of prisoners. The chamber used liquid Zyklon B, which was placed in small glass bottles into the ventilation system next to the door. The bottle was broken with a spike and the gas mixed with the air and was forced into the chamber.

Camp layout

The Main gate or Guard Tower "A", with its 8mm Maxim machine gun, the type used by the Germans in the trenches of World War I, housed the offices of the camp administration. On the front entrance gates to Sachsenhausen is the infamous slogan *Arbeit Macht Frei*. About 200,000 people passed through Sachsenhausen between 1936 and 1945. Anchoring the base of the triangular shaped thousand-acre site was the spacious Apelplatz, where tens of thousands of prisoners would line up for morning and evening roll call. Creating a semi circular configuration were the barracks of custody zone I which fanned out from the base of the Apelplatz. Sachsenhausen was intended to set a standard for other concentration camps, both in its design and the treatment of prisoners. The camp perimeter is, approximately, an equilateral triangle with a semi circular roll call area centered on the main entrance gate in the side running northeast to southwest. Barrack huts lay beyond the roll call area, radiating from the gate. The layout was intended to allow the machine gun post in the entrance gate to dominate the camp but in

practice it was necessary to add additional watchtowers to the perimeter. The standard barrack layout was to have a central washing area and a separate room with toilet bowls and a right and left wing for overcrowded sleeping rooms.

There was an infirmary inside the southern angle of the perimeter and a camp prison within the eastern angle. There was also a camp kitchen and a camp laundry. The camp's capacity became inadequate and the camp was extended in 1938 by a new rectangular area (the "small camp") northeast of the entrance gate and the perimeter wall was altered to enclose it. There was an additional area (*sonder lager*) outside the main camp perimeter to the north; this was built in 1941 for special prisoners that the regime wished to isolate.

Custody zone

The camp was secure and there were few successful escapes. The perimeter consisted of a three metre high stone wall on the outside. Within that there was a space which was patrolled by guards and dogs; it was bordered on the inside by a lethal electric fence; inside that was a gravel "death strip" forbidden to the prisoners. Any prisoner venturing onto the "death strip" would be shot by the guards without warning. Rewards such as extra leave were offered to guards who successfully shot and killed any prisoner who entered onto the death zone.

Prisoner labor

Sachsenhausen was the site of the largest counterfeiting operation ever. The Nazis forced inmate artisans to produce forged American and British currency, as part of a plan to undermine the British and United States' economies, courtesy of Sicherheitsdienst (SD) chief Reinhard Heydrich. Over one billion pounds in counterfeited banknotes was recovered. The Germans introduced fake British £5, £10, £20 and £50 notes into circulation in 1943: the Bank of England never found them. Plans had been made to drop British pounds over London by plane.^[3] Today, these notes are considered very valuable by collectors. An industrial area, outside the western camp perimeter, contained SS workshops in which prisoners were forced to work; those unable to work had to stand to attention for the duration of the working day. Heinkel, the aircraft manufacturer, was a major user of Sachsenhausen labour, using between 6000 and 8000 prisoners on their He 177 bomber. Although official German reports claimed "The prisoners are working without fault", some of these aircraft crashed unexpectedly around Stalingrad and it is suspected that prisoners had sabotaged them.^[4] Other firms included AEG.

Prisoner abuses

Camp punishments could be harsh. Some would be required to assume the "Sachsenhausen salute" where a prisoner would squat with his arms outstretched in front. There was a marching strip around the perimeter of the roll call ground, where prisoners had to march over a variety of surfaces, to test military footwear; between 25 and 40 kilometres were covered each day. Prisoners assigned to the camp prison would be kept in isolation on poor rations and some would be suspended from posts by their wrists tied behind their backs (strappado). In cases such as attempted escape, there would be a public hanging in front of the assembled prisoners. A popular game amongst the guards involved threatening a prisoner with death if they did not stand on the "death zone" gravel strip inside the camp. Once the prisoner stood on the gravel, he/she was killed, as they were not allowed to stand on it.

Aftermath

Some 30,000 inmates died there from exhaustion, disease, malnutrition or pneumonia from the freezing winter cold. Many were executed or died as the result of brutal medical experimentation. Over the course of its operation, over 100 Dutch resistance fighters were executed at Sachsenhausen. According to an article published on December 13, 2001 in *The New York Times*, "In the early years of the war the SS practiced methods of mass killing there that were later used in the Nazi death camps. Of the roughly 30,000 wartime victims at Sachsenhausen, most were Russian

prisoners of war".^{[5] [6]}

Many women were among the inmates of Sachsenhausen and its subcamps. According to SS files, more than 2,000 women lived in Sachsenhausen, guarded by female SS staff (Aufseherin). Camp records show that there was one male SS soldier for every ten inmates and for every ten male SS there was a woman SS. Several subcamps for women were established in Berlin, including in Neukölln.

Towards the end of the war, 13,000 Red Army POW's arrived at Sachsenhausen. Over 10,000 were executed in the camp by being shot in the back of the neck through a hidden hole in a wall while being measured for a uniform. Their bodies were then burnt in a crematorium.

With the advance of the Red Army in the spring of 1945, Sachsenhausen was prepared for evacuation. On April 20–21, the camp's SS staff ordered 33,000 inmates on a forced march northeast. Most of the prisoners were physically exhausted and thousands did not survive this death march; those who collapsed en route were shot by the SS. On April 22, 1945, the camp's remaining 3,000 inmates, including 1,400 women were liberated by the Red Army and Polish 2nd Infantry Division of Ludowe Wojsko Polskie.

Camp commanders

- SS-Obersturmbannführer - Michael Lippert, July 1936 - October 1936
- SS-Standartenführer - Karl Otto Koch, October 1936 - July 1937
- SS-Oberführer - Hans Helwig, July 1937 - January 1938
- SS-Oberführer - Hermann Baranowski, February 1938 - September 1939
- SS-Oberführer - Hans Loritz
- SS-Sturmbannführer - Walter Eisfeld
- SS-Sturmbannführer - Anton Kaindl
- SS-Sturmbannführer - Albert Sauer, 1942 - 1943

Notable inmates and victims during German period



Wash up area for prisoners

The wife and children of Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria, members of the Wittelsbach family, were held in the camp from October 1944 to April 1945, before being transferred to Dachau concentration camp.

Gottfried Graf von Bismarck-Schönhausen, a grandson of Otto von Bismarck and an SS officer who was aware of the preparations for the July 20 plot to assassinate Hitler, was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen until its liberation by Soviet forces.

Hasso von Boehmer, German Lieutenant Colonel on the General Staff and one of the July 20 Plotters, was temporarily detained in the camp's

clinic in 1944 due to illness. He was then moved to Berlin.



Recreation of the security perimeter at Sachsenhausen



Arbeit Macht Frei gate

Julius Leber, a German politician of the SPD, was held in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from 1933 until 1937, having been declared a "dangerous opponent of the regime".

Hans von Dohnanyi, a German jurist, rescuer of Jews, and resistance fighter against the Nazi Germany regime, was imprisoned in the camp in 1944 until his execution in April 1945.

Reverend Martin Niemöller, a critic of the Nazis and author of the poem *First they came...*, was also a prisoner at the camp.

Herschel Grynszpan, whose November 7, 1938 assassination of the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath served as a pretext for Kristallnacht, the anti-semitic pogrom of November 9–10, 1938, was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen in 1940. Later he was moved to Magdeburg.^[7]

Kurt Schuschnigg, the penultimate Chancellor of Austria before Anschluss, and Reinhold Wulle, monarchist and former German National People's Party leader, were prisoners at Sachsenhausen.

Francisco Largo Caballero, Spanish politician and trade unionist who served as the Prime Minister of the Second Republic during 1936 and 1937. Upon the defeat of the Republic in 1939 at the end of the Spanish Civil War he fled to France, where he was later arrested during the German occupation. He spent most of World War II imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg concentration camp, until the liberation of the camps at the end of the war. He would die a few months after liberation.

Paul Reynaud, the penultimate Prime Minister of France before its defeat by the Germans, and Georges Mandel, Minister of Overseas France, were held in Sachsenhausen in 1942-1943.

Fritz Thyssen, a German businessman who emigrated from Germany, was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and later transferred to Dachau.

Ukrainian nationalist leaders Taras Bulba-Borovets, Andriy Melnyk and Oleh Stuhl (briefly), Stepan Bandera and Yaroslav Stetsko were imprisoned there until September-October 1944 (two of Bandera's brothers died in the camp); Oleh Olzhych was tortured to death in June 1944.

Georg Elser, an opponent of Nazism who attempted to kill Adolf Hitler on his own in 1938, was a prisoner at Sachsenhausen; later he was moved to Dachau concentration camp.

Stefan Rowecki, chief commander of Polish Armia Krajowa was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen in 1943 and probably executed there in 1944.

Yakov Dzhugashvili, Joseph Stalin's eldest son, was briefly imprisoned in the camp and died there in 1943 under unclear circumstances.

Dmitry Karbyshev, Red Army general and Hero of the Soviet Union (posthumously) was briefly imprisoned in the camp before he was moved to Mauthausen concentration camp.

Antonín Zápotocký, General Secretary of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (later Prime Minister and President), was sent to Sachsenhausen in 1940. He became a Kapo, which ultimately helped him survive the war.

The Danish Communist leader Aksel Larsen was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen from 1943 to 1945. Einar Gerhardsen and Trygve Bratteli of the Norwegian Labour Party, who would later become prime ministers of Norway, were also incarcerated in Sachsenhausen until they were liberated.

The Norwegian pacifist Olaf Kullmann was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen in April 1942 and perished there in July of the same year.^[8]

Captain Sigismund Payne Best and Major Richard Henry Stevens, British intelligence agents kidnapped during the Venlo incident, were detained in Sachsenhausen before they were transferred to Dachau concentration camp.

Jack Churchill, a famous British soldier, was placed in Sachsenhausen, then later transferred to Tyrol.

Peter Churchill, British SOE agent, later transferred to Tyrol.

Wing Commander Harry Day, Flight Lieutenants Bertram James and Sydney Dowse, RAF Pilots, who had escaped during The Great Escape from Stalag Luft III, sent to Sachsenhausen as punishment, where with Jack Churchill and Major Johnnie Dodge escaped via a tunnel built by James and Dowse in September 1944. All were recaptured and held in solitary confinement in the Death Cells (Station Z). However, they were later returned to the Sonderlager (special camp) within the main camp. All three survived and were transferred to Tyrol.

Major Johnnie Dodge, a British Army Officer and relation of Winston Churchill who had escaped during The Great Escape from Stalag Luft III. Later, in February 1945, was removed from solitary confinement and sent back to Britain, via Switzerland, to act as a peace envoy to the British Government, arriving just before VE Day.

Hans Grundig, German artist.

Among those executed in "Station Z" were the commandos from Operation Musketoön; the Grand Prix motor racing champion, William Grover-Williams; and John Godwin RNVR, a British Naval Sub-Lieutenant who managed to shoot dead the commander of his execution party, for which he was mentioned in despatches posthumously.

Willi Lehmann, NKVD spy, was probably cremated at Sachsenhausen in December 1942.

On September 15, 1939, August Dickman, a German Jehovah's Witness, was publicly shot because of his conscientious objection to joining the armed forces. The SS had expected his death to persuade fellow Witnesses to abandon their own refusals and to show respect for camp rules and authorities. The effort failed, however. Other Witnesses emphatically refused to back down and begged to be martyred also.

Heinrich Koenen, a communist spy captured in Berlin, was executed in Sachsenhausen in 1945.

Bl. Innocent Guz of Lviv [Innocenty] [baptized Józef Wojciech (Joseph Adalbert)] (Polish born in Ukraine, Franciscan priest, martyred by Nazis at Sachsenhausen [Germany] at age 50 in 1940 [beatified 1999])

Friedrich Weißler, German lawyer active in resistance movement against the National Socialism

Albert Willmsky, German Roman Catholic priest active in resistance movement against the National Socialism

The structure under the Soviets

Further information: NKVD special camps

In August 1945 the Soviet Special Camp No. 7 was moved to the area of the former concentration camp. Nazi functionaries were held in the camp, as were political prisoners and inmates sentenced by the Soviet Military Tribunal. By 1948, Sachsenhausen, now renamed "Special Camp No. 1", was the largest of three special camps in the Soviet Occupation Zone. The 60,000 people interned over five years included 6,000 German officers transferred from Western Allied camps.[9] Others were Nazi functionaries, anti-Communists and Russians, including Nazi collaborators and soldiers who contracted sexually transmitted diseases in Germany.

One of the camps commandants was Roman Rudenko[10], the Soviet Chief Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials.

By the time the camp was closed in the spring of 1950, at least 12,000 had died of malnutrition and disease.^[11]

With the fall of the communist East Germany it was possible to do excavations in the former camps; in Sachsenhausen, the bodies of 12,500 victims were found, most were children, adolescents and elderly people.[12]

The Sachsenhausen camp today

In 1956, the East German government established the site as a national memorial, which was inaugurated on 23 April 1961. The plans involved the removal of most of the original buildings and the construction of an obelisk, statue and meeting area, reflecting the outlook of the current government.

The government of the GDR emphasised the suffering of political prisoners over that of the other groups detained at Sachsenhausen. The memorial obelisk contains eighteen red triangles, the symbol the Nazis gave to political prisoners, usually communists. There is a plaque in Sachsenhausen built in memory of the Death March. This plaque has a picture of malnourished male prisoners marching, all of whom are wearing the red triangle of a political prisoner.

At present, the site of the Sachsenhausen camp, at Strasse der Nationen 22 in Oranienburg, is open to the public as a museum and a memorial. Several buildings and structures survive or have been reconstructed, including guard towers, the camp entrance, crematory ovens and the camp barracks.

After German reunification, the camp was entrusted to a foundation which opened a museum on the site. The museum features artwork created by inmates and a 30 centimetre high pile of gold teeth (extracted by the Germans from the prisoners), scale models of the camp, pictures, documents and other artifacts illustrating life in the camp. Further exhibits are expected to open in late 2007, including the restored camp kitchen. The administrative buildings from which the entire German concentration camp network was run have been preserved and can also be seen.

Following the discovery in 1990 of mass graves from the Soviet period, a separate museum has been opened documenting the camp's Soviet-era history, in the former *sonder lager*.

The compound has been attacked by Neo-Nazis several times. In September 1992, barracks 38 and 39 of the Jewish Museum were severely damaged in an arson attack. The perpetrators were arrested, and the barracks were reconstructed by 1997.^{[13] [14]}

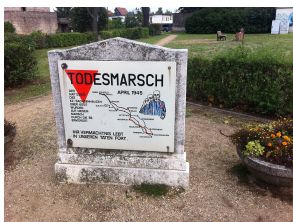


Plaque to honour Dutch resistance fighters executed at Sachsenhausen ("Between 1940-1945 over 100 Dutch resistance fighters have been shot here")



Arson damage caused to this barrack building has been covered in glass to protect it, whilst still showing the damage to those visiting the camp.

Gallery



Death March memorial plaque -
Sept 2010



Soviet Liberation
Memorial - full
size - Nov 2005



There are eighteen
red triangles on
each side of the
Memorial Obelisk
- Sept 2010



The Memorial



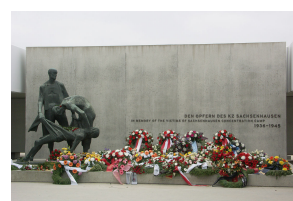
Memorial statue at the base of
the Obelisk - Sept 2010



Jewish barracks and museum,
2006



Sachsenhausen Crematorium,
Oranienburg, Berlin, 2009



Sachsenhausen Crematorium
Memorial, Oranienburg, Berlin,
2009



Commemorative
postage stamp



Main entrance, July 2006



One of the perimeter
watchtowers, May 2007



Prisoner's uniform. May 2007



Pathology Block over Mortuary
Cellar used for storing bodies
prior to cremation



Infirmary Barracks, later used for
medical experiments and now
housing an exhibition.



The green building beyond the
entrance gate is the remnants of
the SS troop barracks



Entrance viewed from the Roll
Call Area



Wall around Roll Call Area
indicating positions of barrack
blocks



Execution Trench



Execution trench



Medical post mortem table



Sachsenhausen Concentration
Camp, Oranienburg, Berlin, 2007



Toilet inside the
barracks



Bunk beds inside the
barracks



Prison cell



Boot-testing track, used
especially by pink triangle
(homosexual) prisoners

Footnotes

- [1] Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, Routledge, 2002 1st ed., p. 11
- [2] <http://jewishgen.org/forgottencamps/Camps/SachsenhausenEng.html>
- [3] Adam Lebor & Roger Boyes, *Surviving Hitler*, Simon&Schuster, pg. 230, 1st ed. 2000
- [4] "Use of Prisoners in the aircraft industry (translated)" (http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/imt/document/nca_vol4/1584-III-ps.htm). *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Volume IV*. The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. 1996-2007. . Retrieved 2008-02-25.
- [5] (<http://www.idoc-human-renewal.org/gelbe/readingroom/horrors.html>)
- [6] Evans, Richard J (2006). *The Third Reich in Power*. London: Penguin Books. pp. 255–256. ISBN 0-141-00976-4.
- [7] Herschel Grynszpan#Grynszpan versus Goebbels
- [8] Ottosen, Kristian, ed (2004) (in Norwegian). *Nordmenn i fangenskap 1940–1945* (2nd ed.). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. p. 420. ISBN 82-15-00288-9.
- [9] <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A0CEFDA163EF934A25751C1A9679C8B63>
- [10] <http://www.fredautley.com/nuremberg.htm>
- [11] Website on Sachsenhausen (<http://www.stiftung-bg.de/gums/en/geschichte/speziellager/spezial01.htm>)
- [12] <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE6D61131F937A1575AC0A964958260&sec=&spon=&scp=13&sq=Sachsenhausen&st=cse>
- [13] <http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/camps/ftp.py?camps//sachsenhausen/press/upi.082993>
- [14] <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Sachsenhausen/MemorialSite/JewishMuseum.html>

References

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- General information on the Sachsenhausen concentration camp (<http://www.gedenkstaette-sachsenhausen.de/gums/en/>) web site of the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation: Memorial and Museum Sachsenhausen (<http://www.gedenkstaette-sachsenhausen.de/gums/en/besucherservice/service01.htm>)
- Foot & Langley, 'MI9 - Escape and Evasion 1939 - 1945', Book Club Associates, 1979 ISBN 0-316-28840-3

Further reading

- Finn, Gerhard: *Sachsenhausen 1936-1950 : Geschichte eines Lagers*. Bad Münstereifel: Westkreuz-Verlag, 1988. ISBN 3-922131-60-3
- Sachsenhausen travel guide from Wikitravel

External links

- History of the Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg camp (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Sach.html>) on the Jewish Virtual Library part of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/copyright.html>)
 - Sachsenhausen among the Nazi camps (Germany), with list of its subcamps (<http://www.jewishgen.org/ForgottenCamps/Camps/MainCampsEng.html>) on a site is hosted by JewishGen, Inc (<http://www.jewishgen.org/>)
 - Photos and some history of Sachsenhausen (<http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Sachsenhausen/ConcentrationCamp/GasChamber.html>) by scrapbookpages.com (<http://www.scrapbookpages.com/AboutUs.html>)
 - Gedenkstätte und Museum Sachsenhausen (<http://www.stiftung-bg.de/gums/en/index.htm>)
 - Article in EXBERLINER Magazine (<http://www.exberliner.com/mustsees/memorial-and-museum-sachsenhausen>)
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